

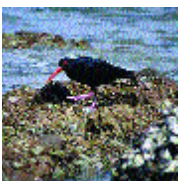
Learning centers ignite interest and advance research in national parks

by Lynne Murdock



NPS PHOTO (ALL)

A joint venture between Kenai Fjords National Park and the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, the Ocean Alaska Science and Learning Center promotes research and educational opportunities related to the Alaskan coast and waters. As part of a learning center-sponsored conference on Alaskan ocean resources, students learned to use global positioning systems for beach mapping.



The Ocean Alaska Science and Learning Center is funding a productivity study of the black oystercatcher, a shorebird whose recovery since the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Kenai Fjords National Park is unknown.

IN 2002, NPS LEARNING CENTERS, A KEY COMPONENT of the Natural Resource Challenge, made tremendous progress in igniting the interest of the American public in the unsurpassed scientific and educational opportunities found in national parks. Learning centers have been designed as public-private partnerships that involve a wide spectrum of people and organizations in opportunities to better understand our natural world and to apply science in park management. The centers attract researchers not affiliated with the National Park Service to conduct research and make new information about park resources available to park managers and partners, the public, and neighboring communities. In 2002 eight new learning centers moved into various stages of development and the initial five learning centers continued to serve as field stations for collaborative research activities.

Collaboration and cooperation are the hallmarks of learning centers, serving to leverage the resources of the National Park Service and its partners. A shining example in 2002 is a joint effort between the National Park Service and the State of Maine to develop the Acadia Learning Center. The center will be sited on a 100-acre former Navy base acquired by the National Park Service on 1 July 2002. Through coordinated funding and planning, the base will be converted to suitable laboratory, classroom, office, and residential facilities.

Many of the learning centers are engaging students and volunteers in programs that provide hands-on opportunities to explore science; in most cases the efforts of students and volunteers also benefit the parks. For example, the North Coast and Cascades Learning Center, which is in its first year of operation, provided science programs for 16,400 children, teenagers, and adults in 2002. One of the center's projects helped North Cascades National Park team up with EarthCorps and Seattle Parks and Recreation to involve 200 students from inner-city Seattle in a project to control nonnative invasive plants. Through another educational partnership project, Cape Cod National Seashore's Atlantic Learning Center is partnering with NASA to develop an education program on remote sensing that involves both teachers and researchers. The program, funded by a grant from the National Park Foundation, will use existing remote sensing research to demonstrate remote sensing technology, enabling students and teachers to use these tools to interpret data collected locally.

Learning centers are well on the way to becoming leaders in education and outreach. The Pacific

Coast Learning Center won awards from the National Association for Interpretation in 2002 for a curriculum guide, *Discovering the Northern Elephant Seals*, and for a redesigned website. The center also received a 2002 Department of the Interior Environmental Achievement Award for exceptional contributions in the area of education and outreach.

In 2002, learning centers also advanced groundbreaking research that benefits national parks. Researchers working in conjunction with the Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center are addressing priority research needs at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, including the effects of ground-level ozone on native plant species; inventories of invertebrate, plant, and fungi species; and monitoring of songbird, salamander, and moth populations. Researchers and volunteers at Rocky Mountain National Park, working through the Continental Divide Research and Learning Center, also made significant contributions in 2002 (see page 14).

In addition to the 13 learning centers that are currently in operation, proposals for 17 more have been approved for establishment should funding become available in the future (see page 10). Each proposed center represents the possibility inherent in the Natural Resource Challenge to focus energy, commitment, and resources on better understanding our natural heritage. ■

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Initiated in FY 2002, the Old-growth Bottomland Forest Research and Education Center is hosted by Congaree Swamp National Monument, South Carolina. During the year the center facilitated research and educational activities, including a program to familiarize the public with fish species being investigated at the park.